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ABSTRACT

This report highlights four urban comprehensive secondary schools that are developing, implementing, and evaluating reform initiatives that include vocational and technical education as a key component of these efforts. Efforts of these four high schools are described: Bryan High School, Omaha, Nebraska; Humboldt Secondary Complex, St. Paul, Minnesota; Mayfield High School, Las Cruces, New Mexico; and West Charlotte High School, Charlotte, North Carolina. Each description provides information on the school, restructuring initiatives, initiating the change process, and restructuring facilitators and barriers. Types of restructuring initiatives include the following: tech prep, advisement, block scheduling, integration of vocational and academic courses, and a career planning portfolio. Late start days, teacher meetings, and teamwork are the initiation methods discussed. These facilitators are identified: administrator support, teamwork, teacher-driven action, and partnerships with universities and colleges. The following barriers are cited: loss of momentum, inservice programs, evaluation, lack of inservice training and common planning, scheduling, lack of involvement from outside groups, and lack of consistent leadership. A final section provides a summary of implications for leaders of school reforms. Conclusions about successful restructuring are as follows: it takes time, requires collaborative teamwork from all stakeholders, occurs from both internal and external pressure and motives, and is an ongoing process. (YLB)



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NCRVE

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Office of Student Services' BRIEF

Volume 8, Number 3

# PROFILES OF SCHOOLS IN CHANGE: FOUR URBAN HIGH SCHOOLS

by Thomas R. Wermuth, Esmeralda Cunanan, and Carolyn Maddy-Bernstein

*"The problems faced by urban high schools differ from those in other settings not so much in type as in scope and intensity. Most of the differences revolve around the vast diversity of the student body and local environment" (Louis and Miles, 1990, p. 11).*

The public outcry to improve the quality of urban education across the nation has been reverberating for decades. Educators, policymakers, researchers, parents, and community members continue to work toward this end. Educational changes have been implemented in urban schools striving to better respond to the needs of a highly diverse student population. This BRIEF highlights four urban comprehensive secondary schools that are developing, implementing, and evaluating reform initiatives that include **vocational and technical education as a key component** of these efforts. Specifically, it incorporates two of a series of three interrelated monographs (Wermuth, Maddy-Bernstein, & Grayson, 1996a; Wermuth et al., 1996b) describing the findings associated with a research project titled *Case Studies of Urban Schools*. The project was conducted by researchers from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) from 1995-1997, through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. This BRIEF is written to provide educators with information to facilitate lasting change in their schools.

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## BACKGROUND

While comprehensive public high schools are the most common form of secondary-level schools in urban settings, they are among the least successful public institutions in the United States (Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990). Furthermore, education reform literature has generally neglected the role of vocational education in restructuring efforts other than in specialized settings such as magnet schools or career academies. *The Case Studies Of Urban Schools* project was conducted to discover how four comprehensive high schools in urban areas are changing or have changed to better meet the needs of their students. The project researchers addressed the following:

- How has each site implemented educational reform initiatives?
- How does vocational education fit into those reform efforts?

The following four comprehensive high schools that are members of different NCRVE Urban Network* teams were selected for the study:

- Bryan High School in Omaha, Nebraska;
- Humboldt Secondary Complex in St. Paul, Minnesota;
- Mayfield High School in Las Cruces, New Mexico; and
- West Charlotte High School in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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** The NCRVE Urban Network, initiated in 1991, includes 30 teams of secondary and postsecondary educators and business partners from around the United States, all of which have high school members, that have been working with the National Center to implement either tech-prep programs designed to connect secondary and postsecondary vocational education programs or develop integrated academic and vocational education curricula.*

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Project researchers conducted on-site interviews and observations of key personnel and reviewed pertinent records, to describe factors that both facilitated and impeded the implementation of educational changes in the four schools. An analysis of local and state-level policies was undertaken and key individuals were interviewed to gather information explaining the implementation of restructuring activities at each of the partner sites.

## Bryan High School—Omaha, Nebraska

William Jennings Bryan Senior High School (Bryan), located in Southwest Omaha, Nebraska, is one of the comprehensive high schools housing both academic and vocational offerings in the Omaha Public School (OPS). Bryan currently serves 1,325 students from grades 9-12. Approximately thirty percent of its student population are from minority ethnic backgrounds. African-American students represent the largest portion of that 30 percent and makeup approximately sixteen percent of the total Bryan student body. During a recent school year, 34 percent of the students participated in free or reduced-price lunch programs, 10 percent was enrolled in special education programs, and the female-male ratio was 47 to 53.

### *Restructuring Initiatives*

Since the 1991-92 school year, the Bryan staff have concentrated on implementing 5 interrelated restructuring activities, including

- advisement,
- career clusters,
- write stuff,
- careers options plus, and
- block scheduling.

Although each of these activities has altered the structure of education provided to students at Bryan, it was apparent to the site visit team that developing and implementing the block schedule became the overarching restructuring initiative at Bryan.

### *Initiating the Change Process*

During the 1991-92 academic year, and continuing through 1994-95, OPS approved a plan where Bryan had five "late start days" per year. Late start days gave all teachers time to attend meetings during normal school hours to discuss the pros and cons of implementing block scheduling. A number of the faculty at Bryan expressed the value of having extended meeting time with other teachers as one of the primary keys to the ultimate success of arriving at and implementing block scheduling. The Bryan and OPS administrations allowed the entire process related to block scheduling remain a teacher-driven and -directed activity.

### *Restructuring Facilitators*

The factors that supported block scheduling as a restructuring effort at Bryan are the following:

- administrative support,
- teacher-driven action, and
- seed funding.

The implementation of block scheduling at Bryan was and continues to be a collaborative endeavor among the faculty at Bryan, Bryan administrators, and OPS. The OPS administration provided Bryan with financial resources to explore alternative forms and methods of providing instruction to secondary students. The Bryan administration was supportive of the faculty decision to implement block scheduling. In addition, the Bryan administration excelled in the facilitator role, allowing the faculty to develop a number of teacher-driven initiatives, without feeling the need to claim ownership or mold those initiatives to meet top-down administrative needs and desires.

The *second facilitator* of restructuring efforts at Bryan that emerged was the democratic nature of these initiatives. All teachers at Bryan had the opportunity to participate in every step taken to restructure how Bryan educates its students. Bryan teachers showed their mutual respect and willingness to share their honest opinions about the successes and potential pitfalls associated with the restructuring actions. The faculty at Bryan exude a sense of empowerment and ownership of the school.

During that year, OPS allotted a large portion of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 federal secondary-level funding it received to establish a three year project titled *Careers 2000*, in keeping with then President Bush's America 2000 educational goals schema. The initial *Careers 2000* funding was the *third restructuring* that assisted Bryan in implementing school changes. With this funding, the staff at Bryan also had the opportunity to develop mini-grants related to the other restructuring efforts at Bryan.

***Restructuring Barriers***

The site visit team identified three barriers that the Bryan staff are still struggling to answer or overcome. These barriers are related to:

- loss of momentum,
- inservice programs, and
- evaluation.

Sustaining teachers' enthusiasm and intensity regarding reforms at Bryan during 1995-96 was a major concern. Many of the faculty have expressed the desire to continue pressing for additional restructuring activities, including

- universally solidifying the advisement program,
- increasing the opportunity to incorporate team teaching into the block scheduling format, and
- providing the opportunity to revisit the merit and worth of block scheduling.

A number of the Bryan staff indicated the need for additional inservice training on "how to effectively teach students for 90-minute periods." Teachers also felt that Bryan should continue to hold "late start days" to facilitate school-wide discussion of topical issues related to block scheduling and other restructuring objectives. Another area of concern identified by the site visit team is the need for comprehensive formative and summative evaluation efforts to be undertaken regarding the processes and outcomes associated with the move to block scheduling.

## Humboldt Secondary Complex—St. Paul, Minnesota

Humboldt Secondary Complex (Humboldt), formerly Humboldt High School, opened in 1889 and is one of the oldest public high schools in St. Paul, Minnesota. Humboldt is one of six high schools in the St. Paul Public Schools that is comprehensive in nature, housing both academic and vocational course sequences. Humboldt is a 316,000 square-foot complex built on 16 acres located in southwest St. Paul, in an area known as "South Seventh Street." In the fall of 1981, Humboldt Senior High School added ninth grade to become a four-year school. A year after the addition of ninth grade, the St. Paul Public Schools merged the junior and senior high school programs creating the current Humboldt Secondary Complex configuration. The complex currently houses a distinct middle school which includes grades 7 and 8, and a distinct high school which includes grades 9 through 12.

Approximately 1,300 students per year, 450 in the middle school and 850 in high school, attend Humboldt. During a recent year, sixty percent of the students enrolled at Humboldt were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Hispanic, Southeast Asian, Native American, and African-American. The diversity of the Humboldt student population is reflected in the International Studies and Careers specialty program that is implemented at the school.

Humboldt also provides services to a large number of students enrolled in special education programs. The special education department at Humboldt is the largest secondary-level special education program in the St. Paul public schools and is the home school to many students with low incidence disabilities.

***Restructuring Initiatives***

At first glance, Humboldt is a traditional comprehensive high school. The students attend classes throughout a traditional 7-period day and the building appears to function in an orderly manner. However, two initiatives appear to have the momentum to restructure the education that Humboldt students are receiving. These two programs include the International Studies and Careers (ISC) and the Tech-Prep program.

***Initiating the Change Process***

The ISC program was initially designed to provide students comprehensive instruction in both languages and social studies, focusing on world-related issues. International Studies and Careers (ISC) was identified as a magnet program by the St. Paul public school when those designations were made in 1991. Prior to the implementation of the program, Humboldt teachers met on a regular basis to discuss connections that could be made between the language programs and the social studies courses. While these meetings led to the development of the ISC program plan, it was not until the district designated the program as an official specialty program at Humboldt that ISC was implemented.

The Tech-Prep Implementation Team, a group of vocational and regular teachers, was established at Humboldt. Team members have met regularly since 1992 to design a Tech-Prep program that would mesh with the other curricular offerings. They have also been involved with the NCRVE Urban Network and have attended annual meetings at Berkeley, CA, centered around the implementation of Tech-Prep programs and integrating vocational and academic curricula. Although the Tech-Prep program is not clearly solidified at this point, the relationships that are developing both within and outside of Humboldt should benefit students in the coming school years.

***Restructuring Facilitators***

Although the restructuring efforts are still in the development stage, two primary restructuring facilitators at Humboldt appear to be the following:

- partnerships developed between Humboldt and the local universities and colleges and the Ecolab, and
- formation of the Tech-Prep Implementation Team.

The partnerships with the local postsecondary institutions have provided the opportunity for Humboldt teachers and administrators to interact with individuals interested in teacher education and secondary level curriculum development and implementation. These efforts have assisted the staff in the development of Tech-Prep initiatives.

The Tech-Prep Implementation Team, with its members expressing the desire to implement broad-based restructuring efforts, is a potential restructuring facilitator. The energy and willingness to examine the dynamic nature of school change may spread to the entire Humboldt staff if the team is successful at implementing a clearly defined comprehensive tech-prep initiative at Humboldt.

***Restructuring Barriers***

Four barriers appear to be impeding the implementation of restructuring initiatives at Humboldt, including:

- high student mobility,
- lack of inservice training,
- lack of common planning,
- scheduling, and
- administrative support

Student mobility is a problem throughout the secondary schools in St. Paul, MN, in part because of the open enrollment initiatives that exist in Minnesota. The high level of student mobility, at least 30% since 1990, erodes program continuity and stability.

Like many educators nationally, Humboldt staff identified the lack of teacher-directed inservice as a barrier to change and advocate for future building level staff development activities.

The lack of common planning time for teachers working on tech-prep and integration activities was also identified as a barrier. Without a common planning time within the parameters of the school day, Humboldt staff find it difficult to work cooperatively on lessons and other joint activities.

The final barrier to restructuring identified by the Humboldt teachers was the lack of input related to district level scheduling. Building level scheduling may be one way of addressing alternative scheduling needs that do not necessarily mesh with the district scheduling system.

## Mayfield High School—Las Cruces, New Mexico

Mayfield High School (Mayfield) is a four-year comprehensive high school housing both academic and vocational course offerings. The school is located in the northwest quadrant of Las Cruces, New Mexico. Sixty percent (60%) of the 1,750 students who attended Mayfield during 1995-96 are Hispanic. While the vast majority of the students in Mayfield, as well as in Las Cruces, are Hispanic, the majority (71%) of the Mayfield faculty are Caucasian. Consequently, Las Cruces Public Schools are making a "concerted effort to attract and recruit Hispanic teachers."

The relationships that Las Cruces Public Schools have with the New Mexico State University (NMSU) and the Dona Ana Branch Community College (DABCC), have been mutually beneficial to all parties concerned, including the Mayfield students and faculty. The DABCC and the Las Cruces Public Schools have articulated options where students can enroll in both high school and the community college in a program called Area Vocational School (AVS). Through the AVS, students concurrently receive credit towards their high school diploma and a college certificate or degree. The AVS program is one effort stemming from the cooperative work of the Dona Ana Tech-Prep Consortium (DATPC); an educational consortium among the faculty from DABCC; faculty from the three comprehensive high schools in the Las Cruces Public Schools; and two rural school districts also located in Dona Ana County, Hatch Valley Municipal Schools, and Gadsden Independent School District. Specifically, Mayfield has developed articulations agreements with DABCC in the following areas: fashion merchandising, secretarial administration, occupational business, retail marketing, computer-aided drafting, architectural technology, and automotive technology.

***Restructuring Initiatives***

Restructuring efforts at Mayfield focus on three broad areas: (a) DATPC initiatives, (b) development and implementation of the business academe, and (c) implementation of the block schedule. Although the development and carrying out of most of the DATPC activities and block scheduling were not the sole efforts of professionals at Mayfield, they have had tremendous impact on the faculty, staff, and students at Mayfield. The block schedule, initiated as a district level decision has also influenced life at Mayfield.

***Initiating the Change Process***

Restructuring efforts at Mayfield have been influenced by both internal and external forces and events. Outside of the walls of Mayfield, the DATPC and the Las Cruces Public Schools have been a catalyst driving some of the changes that have taken place or are scheduled to happen at Mayfield. A number of individuals in Mayfield have worked to restructure life at Mayfield to better meet the needs of students while enrolled at Mayfield and upon the completion of high school.

***Restructuring Facilitators***

The two restructuring facilitators that emerged in Mayfield both relate to teamwork. The first is the teamwork that exists in the greater Las Cruces area, including the DATPC and various school district committees. The second is the teamwork exhibited by the staff at Mayfield, such as the team of teachers that work in the business academe.

During the site visits, all individuals expressed interest in the well being of youth and young adults and how educational systems can change to better meet their needs as students and future adults. The DATPC and the business academe faculty at Mayfield are prime examples of teamwork. These groups of professionals are clearly committed to improving the lives of students.

***Restructuring Barriers***

Two restructuring barriers include:

- lack of involvement from groups outside of the educational arena, and
- coordinating various reform initiatives into a unified effort.

Although there are a number of teams working in the greater Las Cruces area to advance the education received by students, membership on those committees consists exclusively of education personnel. It may prove beneficial to involve receptive civic business leaders as members of restructuring-related committees and teams in order to garner public support for educational projects.

Furthermore, it appears that a number of the teachers interviewed felt that some restructuring activities that are either being developed or implemented at Las Cruces were in competition instead of complimenting each other. For example, a few of the teachers felt that the implementation of the block schedule has decreased the likelihood of success for the business academe program because a significant number of students wishing to enroll in the academe had unsolvable scheduling conflicts.

## West Charlotte High School—Charlotte, North Carolina

West Charlotte High School (West Charlotte), one of fourteen public high schools operated by the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Public Schools, is comprehensive in nature offering both traditional academic and vocational courses to over 1,700 students from grades 10 through 12. It is a school facility that reminds most visitors of a small liberal arts college campus rather than an urban high school.

During 1995-96, students enrolled at West Charlotte were African American (60%), Caucasian (25%), Asian (10%), Hispanic (5%), and American Indian (<1%). The plurality of the student population at West Charlotte is evident with students from over 63 counties attending West Charlotte during the past school year and a flag for each of those counties hangs from the ceiling in the student commons. The students at West Charlotte are served by over 100 faculty members. Students and teachers take pride in their school.

In addition to providing vocational and academic course offerings, West Charlotte also houses two district-wide specialty programs. First, West Charlotte houses the Charlotte-Mecklenberg secondary-level English as a Second Language (ESL) program. Approximately 100 students are enrolled in ESL programs at West Charlotte. In addition, West Charlotte offers the Open-School program which functions as a school within a school and provides students instruction in a non-traditional format. Students enroll in the open program in elementary school and have the option to continue with the program throughout their public school careers.

***Restructuring Initiatives***

Three areas where West Charlotte has initiated restructuring efforts include:

- tech-prep program,
- integration of vocational and academic courses, and the
- implementation of a career planning portfolio to be completed by all high school students across the district.

***Initiating the Change Process***

The tech-prep program that exists in the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Public Schools was a district-wide effort between teams of secondary level teachers from specific disciplines from the various high schools in the Charlotte area and instructors from specific disciplines at Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC). A team of teachers at West Charlotte has also been working with the NCRVE Urban Schools Network to develop and implement integrated courses at West Charlotte. To date, the integration team is still meeting and attempting to develop integrated courses. The career planning portfolio is an excellent start of restructuring education to be more focused on the post school goals and outcomes attained by schools. The career portfolio program is a joint effort between the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools and educators from West Charlotte.

*Restructuring Facilitators*

Although most of the restructuring efforts at West Charlotte are not yet solidified, there are two major facilitators that could act as a springboard for further restructuring activities. Those two activities are the integration team and the career planning portfolio.

Although the integration team has attended four summer institutes sponsored by NCRVE since 1992, they have yet to overcome barriers to the successful implementation of the plans they have developed in the past. It is suggested that the team continue to meet and work on accomplishing short-term goals related to educational restructuring.

The career planning portfolio seems to be an excellent format to enhance the connections between school-based and work-based learning activities. The portfolio can be an excellent tool and gateway that could be used to solidify additional restructuring activities.

*Restructuring Barriers*

The primary barrier to restructuring at West Charlotte is the lack of consistent leadership. Administrative support is one of the tenets of educational reform. However, West Charlotte having had three principals over the past two academic years did not have the administrative constancy needed to facilitate the successful implementation of a restructuring initiative.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS OF SCHOOL REFORMS

Grieseme and Butler (1983) believe that enhanced student learning is the base element related to the development of educational reform efforts. At each of the four sites enhanced student learning is an explicit goal. However, the site visit team observed that restructuring at the partner-sites focused more on school organization and leadership changes rather than specific strategies designed to improve student learning.

A number of conclusions can be drawn regarding educational restructuring from the case studies of the four sites. Successful restructuring

- takes time,
- requires collaborative teamwork from all stakeholders,
- occurs from both internal and external pressure and motives, and
- is an on-going process.

Based on the case studies of the four sites, successful restructuring appears to take time to develop, implement, and evaluate. On the average, it has taken the partner-sites approximately three to five years to plan and develop restructuring activities before they are initiated on a wide scale. In many cases, changes are not totally integrated even at the end of five years.

Teamwork is a critical element in most successful restructuring initiatives. The sites that have been most successful in implementing restructuring efforts are those that worked at developing teams within the school that extend beyond more traditional departmental or administrative-teacher divisions. In addition, they have made connections with individuals outside of the school building, such as parents and representatives from the community, including business and civic leaders.

The four sites provided clear examples of school district administrators and school building faculty working together to restructure comprehensive high schools to better serve diverse student populations. While it is difficult to determine exactly whether the restructuring activities were initiated by building level faculty, administration, or district level administration, shared governance was nonetheless exhibited by faculty and administrators at the four partner-sites. If restructuring activities come solely to the school from the district, it is likely that teachers will not completely support these efforts. Similarly, restructuring efforts that are completely generated at the building level without district level support may also fail.

Finally, restructuring activities never end. Faculty at each partner site realized that restructuring is never finalized and that once a particular initiative is developed and implemented, it is formatively assessed and altered for further improvement. The transient nature of our society and the rapidity of technological and culture change may force schools to reinvent themselves on an annual basis.

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